

POETRY

A Sample Analysis

Digging by Seamus Heaney

The Title

The title of the poem could refer to turning over soil for planting or harvesting, or digging deeper to uncover some sort of treasure. Alternatively the poet could be thinking of digging up the past, or uncovering some secret hidden in the past.

The Subject and the point-of-view

The poem is written from the poet's perspective and there is no doubt that this poem is about a writer for in the opening lines we learn that:

*'Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests:...'*

The poet is writing in his room which is upstairs and overlooks the garden. His attention is caught by the 'clean rasping sound' of a spade digging into the 'gravelly ground'. The poet looks out and sees his father digging as he has done for twenty years. He remembers how as children they'd enjoyed picking out new potatoes uncovered by his father and he describes the father's skill with a spade.

His father's skill with a spade reminds the poet of his father's father and the second part of the poem describes the poet's grandfather who it would seem was a turf-cutter, or peat digger who cut turf for a living.

In the final lines of the poem the poet recognises that he is no digger, at least not with a spade, but he says that he will dig with his pen. So he regards his pen as metaphorically like a spade. He can use it to plant words and harvest them as poems; it will earn him a living and in words he can uncover the scents and secrets which his father and grandfather discovered in the earth.

The Mood

The poet reflects ruefully on the skill that his father and grandfather possessed with a spade. He is slightly in awe of them as he celebrates their skills and he regrets his own inability to wield a spade. However the final lines recognise his own skill with the pen so the ending is positive.

The Imagery

In the second line the poet describes the pen as resting between his finger and thumb 'snug as a gun'. This simile which is also a palindrome and very neat because of it, suggest that the fit is warm and comforting to the poet yet at the same time hints at the power of the pen to fire words. This same idea of something fitting is continued by the poet in the tenth line when he refers to the father's boot as 'nestled on the lug' of the spade. This introduces the link between the pen and the spade which is mentioned in the final line as the poet states there that he'll dig with his pen.

Another strong image in the poem is of the father's 'straining rump' which is described as moving up and down in a regular manner in the musical rhythm of 'stooping in rhythm through potato drills...' The precision of his movement is matched by the precision of his bladework captured in the language.

The Language and Structure

The language strongly emphasises the poet's thoughts in this poem. His pen is 'squat' and all the words in this line are short and squat to capture this idea. When the poet hears the sound of his father's spade digging he lets us hear it too in the word 'rasping', an onomatopoeia, and in the hard alliterative sound of 'gravelly ground'. When the poet describes his father uncovering the potatoes he uses alliteration again in 'tall tops' and 'buried the bright edge deep' to capture the sharp, precise sound of the spade entering the soil. The precision of the blade work of the father and later the grandfather is captured again when the poet uses 'nicking and slicing', we can almost hear the sound of the bladework in these words. As he digs deeper the sound becomes more metallic and there's an echo in 'down and down' which emphasises the depth of the hole. With the cold smell of the potato mould it becomes damper and the sound changes to 'squelch and slap' both alliterative and onomatopoeic to mimic the noise made in wet clay. Even so, the grandfather is an expert and he digs neatly and efficiently. We hear this in the alliterative 'curt cuts' which are short and clean.

The poem is made up of uneven stanzas which serve to divide the content and to reveal the way that the poet remembers things in snatches. For example the opening couplet serves to establish the setting of the poet writing in the present. The next three lines move us outside with the sound to his father digging. In the next four lines we move back twenty years. This recollection is continued in the following five lines, but here the poet reflects on the digging process leading to his realisation that his father was a skilful 'digger' *Just like his old man*. The next stanza takes us back to another time when he went to visit his grandfather who was digging peat. This leads to the final stanza where the poet reflects on his inability to dig with a spade but to the present and the recognition that he will dig with his pen.

The Evaluation

Heaney effectively communicates to the reader the skill that both his father and his grandfather possessed. They could both 'handle a spade'. It is easy for us to imagine these men digging in their own way, the father in his vegetable patch uncovering potatoes, the grandfather in the peat bogs forming neat bricks from the peat and cutting neatly through living roots. The poet seems a little whistful at times since he obviously doesn't have their skill, however the neat ending which ties in with the beginning with the repetition of:

*'Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.'*

indicates that the poet is happy with his own skill which in its own way will allow him to dig. We as readers can better appreciate the craft of the writer by likening it to the skill of a gardener or a peat digger, so Heaney successfully communicates his message to us and encourages us to appreciate our own skills.

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